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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship of mother-child conflict in immigrant Korean families to their acculturation level, cultural identity, and family bonding, focusing on whether the intensity or frequency of mother-child conflict decreases as the level of acculturation or cultural identity increases. Fifty-two pairs of immigrant Korean American mothers and their children, aged 15 to 18, were interviewed. Twenty-six of the adolescents had been born in Korea and 26 were born in the United States. The intensity of mother-child conflict was significantly related to family bonding as measured by responses to a family bonding scale. The level of acculturation was significantly related to cultural identity, but the relationships among the other variables were not statistically significant. Findings suggest that the frequency of conflict is not related to family bonding, but the intensity of the conflict may be. Findings further suggest that mother-child conflict is not necessarily related to the child's acculturation level or cultural identity, although continued conflict may weaken family bonding. (SLD)

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A Study of the Relationships Between Acculturation, Cultural Identity, Family Bonding, and Parent-Child Conflict Among the Korean-American Adolescents

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SUMMARY

Objectives of the study

This study examined the relationship of mother-child conflict in immigrant Korean families to their acculturation level, cultural identity, and family bonding. We studied the relationship in terms of two aspects of conflict: the frequency of the conflict and the intensity of the conflict. Specific research questions were as follows: 1. Is the degree of acculturation of the adolescents related to the mother-adolescent conflict ? 2. Is the adolescent's cultural identity related to the mother-adolescent conflict ? 3. Is the level of family bonding related to the mother-adolescent conflict?

Perspectives

The number of Korean immigrants to the United States has more than quadrupled since 1969, and continues to grow at a steady pace (Hing, 1993). Meanwhile, there has been a corresponding increase in the population of Korean-American children in American schools. Despite this increase in the number of Korean-American students, little empirical research has been conducted on Korean-Americans as a distinct population. Korean-American adolescents struggle to balance the traditional cultural values of their Korean parents with American attitudes and values. Therefore, in addition to experiencing the typical conflicts that arise from the generation gap that separates an adolescent from his/her parents, the Korean-American adolescent must also experience conflicts arising from this culture clash. The major sources of such conflict between immigrant Korean mothers and their adolescent children were previously investigated and the findings suggest that some of the most frequent and intense conflicts stem from a culture clash between Korean and American values (Kim & Miura, 1996).

The current study examined whether or not the frequency and/or intensity of the mother-child conflict decreases as the level of acculturation or cultural identity increases, and examined the extent to which the frequency or intensity of conflict is related to family bonding. The following research findings attempted to provide insight into the complex inter-relationships among these variables. Such studies should be helpful for educators, program developers, and community workers in developing strategies for youth programs and counseling.

Methods and data sources

The search for and recruitment of possible mother-adolescent pairs for personal interviews was extremely difficult. Potential subjects were selected at random out of the Korean-American telephone directory for Santa Clara County in California. Only a small portion of the families contacted had a target age child in the family, and only about 10% of these families agreed to be interviewed. Fifty-two pairs of immigrant Korean American mothers and their 15- to 18-year-old children (28 females and 24 males) were interviewed. All the

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mothers in the study were born in Korea. Twenty-six adolescents were born in Korea, and 26 were born in the United States. The educational and occupational backgrounds of the mothers varied widely --from some high school education and unskilled labor to mothers with terminal degrees and professional careers.

Data were collected through a 30-minute personal interview with each mother and a 20-minute interview of her child. All interviews were conducted by the first author at the interviewees' homes in either English or Korean, depending on the subjects' linguistic proficiency. The mother and adolescent were interviewed separately. The interview form was a modified version of the Family Issues Checklist (Prinz, Foster, Kent & O'Leary, 1979). Topics/issues considered to be potential sources of parent-child conflict specific to Korean families were added to the original instrument. Interview questions were refined during a pilot study. The final form contained several questions on personal and family background and a list of 50 areas of potential conflict (topics/issues). For each area, the respondent answered on two measures: the frequency of conflicts over the last four-week period and the intensity of the conflicts on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = "calm" and 5 = "very angry"). The topics of conflict centered on daily schedules, household chores, manners and customs, school-related concerns, illegal activities, and issues of adolescent self-expression.

Level of acculturation was measured based on the responses to three interview items: (1) What language do feel most comfortable speaking? (2) With what group do you feel most comfortable? (3) What is the racial group or ethnic background of your friends ? Cultural identity was measured by three interview items also: (1) How do you see yourself in terms of your behaviors and the cultural values you hold(very American, mostly American, multicultural)? (2) How do you feel about yourself being American (extremely proud, somewhat proud, etc.)? (3) How important is it for an ethnic minority member to understand his/her native language and culture? Family bonding was measured by the responses to an 8-item Family Bonding Scale (Kim & Wu, 1994) which was included as a part of the interview form.

Results

As shown in Table 1 below, the intensity of mother-child conflict is significantly related to family bonding. Also, the level of acculturation is significantly related to cultural identity. The relationships between all the other variables were not statistically significant.

Table 1
Correlations among the measures on mother-child conflict, acculturation, cultural identity, and family bonding (N=52)

Variable	Conflict: frequency	Conflict: intensity	Accul-turation	Cultural identity	Family bonding
Conflict: frequency	1.00				
Conflict: intensity	.04	1.00			
Acculturation	-.11	-.14	1.00		
Cultural identity	-.11	-.09	.41**	1.00	
Family bonding	.01	-.34*	-.06	.18	1.00

* p <.05; ** p <.01

More specifically, the results of correlational analyses suggest that:

- There is little relationship between the frequency of mother-child conflict and the intensity of conflict reported by the Korean-American adolescents.
- The frequency of conflict has no significant relationship with the level of acculturation, cultural identity, or family bonding.
- The intensity of conflict has a significant negative relationship with family bonding. The lower their family bonding, the more intense mother-child conflict is.
- The more assimilated to U.S. cultures the adolescents are, the more they identify with main stream cultural values.
- There appears to be some evidence that the more assimilated to U.S. cultures the adolescentis, the lower their reported family bonding, although the relationship was not statistically significant.

Educational/scientific importance of the study

The findings of this study suggest that the frequency of conflict is not related to family bonding but the intensity of conflict may be. The findings also suggest that mother-child conflict is not necessarily related to the child's acculturation level or cultural identity (i.e., whether he/she identifies with Korean values or American values). If the conflict continues, it may weaken their family bonding. These findings will help professionals who work with Korean-American children and families to gain insight into the complex relationships of the parent-child conflict with their acculturation level, cultural identity, and family bonding. Such an insight will help them in dealing daily with the students facing stressful situations as well as in the development of a prevention program for high risk Korean-American adolescents.

Korean immigrant and second-generation adolescents experience enormous challenges involving conflicting values, norms and expectations between their parent's native culture and American main stream culture. Many Korean immigrant adolescents reject their own culture while simultaneously feeling rejected by the larger society surrounding them. They feel alienated and experience identity conflict as well as intense conflict with their parents. As a consequence, many of them are at risk regardless of their academic performance at school. Educators and community workers realize that teaching high-risk students how to cope with stressful experiences is an important part of their job.

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